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E-books and everything after: an update from the NoWAL experience

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INTRODUCTION

From 2004 onwards, the North West Academic Libraries consortium (NoWAL)¹ offered its users access to a corpus of 15,000 e-books made available by the US aggregator NetLibrary. In May 2006, the NoWAL board requested that, in order to inform the consortium's future policy with regard to e-books, an 'E-book Monitoring Group' be convened. The group's remit was to monitor changes in e-book provision generally, as well as agreements in place among consortium members, and to report to the board in summer 2007. The group first met in April 2007 and was chaired by Julie Berry, associate director (liaison and support), University of Salford Information Services Division.²

The NoWAL E-books Monitoring Group presented its report, jointly authored by all members, to the NoWAL board on 3 October 2007. This article is a summary of the report and its recommendations. Any enquiries about the group's work should be directed to Peter M. Wynne, NoWAL Executive Secretary (p.wynne@mmu.ac.uk).

THE NoWAL E-BOOK CONTEXT

NoWAL was the first UK higher education library consortium to make a large corpus of e-books available to its users. An account of how this

initiative originated and was implemented was published in 2005.³ Furthermore, the management of the e-books service during the term of the contract is described in detail in each NoWAL annual report.⁴

NoWAL's contract for e-books was with NetLibrary, a subsidiary of the US library services conglomerate OCLC (Online Computer Library Center). The contract's main features were:

- access to 12,000 copyright titles
- access to c.3,400 public domain titles
- up to three simultaneous users of any one title
- 30 months' duration from February 2004
- NoWAL to 'own' an agreed percentage of the content
- access to owned content for up to five years after contract
- opportunity to 'refresh' (i.e. replace) a percentage of the content each year.

After the launch in February 2004 use of the service increased rapidly, and it continued to be heavily used throughout the term of the contract.⁵ Despite this, there were reservations among some members about the methods used to select the original corpus of e-books. Rather than selecting title by title, acquisitions personnel had been asked to indicate the publishers which they wished to see included, and a list was compiled of publishers attracting the most votes. The material represented by the list was then further limited by publication date and average value per title. Similar content-selection methods were used in the two 'content refreshments' provided for by the terms of the contract, in February 2005 and February 2006.

With the agreement with NetLibrary due either to end or be renewed in summer 2006, the board heard in November 2005 that there were a number of unresolved issues that were considered unsatisfactory by participating libraries. In addition, all attempts to begin quantitative and qualitative evaluation had proved unsuccessful.

Furthermore, at a meeting in Manchester held in spring 2006 representatives from NoWAL libraries heard the various options which NetLibrary was prepared to make available to the consortium at the end of the contract. Partly as a consequence of the often repeated criticism of the blunt selection tools which it had been necessary to apply to the large initial corpus of NetLibrary titles, there was no enthusiasm for a contract for another large

body of material from the same provider, or for a second agreement for a large general e-book collection from any provider. NoWAL members demonstrated clearly expressed preferences for selection at individual-title level, and for core texts from UK imprints.

Delegates at the meeting instead recommended an alternative which had been included in the original agreement: rather than renew the subscription, NoWAL was able to retain a specified percentage of the collection. This would be subject to a management fee payable to NetLibrary for maintaining access, but would enable the consortium to retain the titles accounting for 90% of all use. This recommendation was approved by the NoWAL board in summer 2006, and the management fee was renewed for a further year in summer 2007.

In May 2007, the NoWAL NetLibrary collection received its one millionth access since monthly statistics were begun in September 2004. In that period, total monthly hits have increased from 10,872 to the highest number ever recorded: 61,643 in November 2006. In the ten months to October 2007, the collection received 338,045. A spreadsheet showing total accesses and average use per title, by individual library and by the whole consortium, can be viewed on the NoWAL website.⁶

CONTENT-SELECTION MECHANISMS

As noted above, the tools available to facilitate selection of e-book content proved a major difficulty during the creation of the initial NoWAL NetLibrary collection, and for its refreshment. Consequently, the NoWAL E-books Monitoring Group chose to emphasise in its report to the board the necessity of identifying more refined selection methods in any future consortial deal.

Even for an individual institution, it is very difficult to satisfy all stakeholders when several thousand titles need to be chosen from a list of tens of thousands and when time is very limited. The position worsened when it became evident during the refreshments of the NoWAL collection that publishers were becoming far less willing to sell e-books as part of a shared consortial collection.

The group noted that the emerging model that is now being offered by aggregators is one in which individual libraries choose their own content on a title-by-title basis, whether as part of 'steady stream' ordering (as for printed books) or as a one-off purchase of a tailored collection (for example towards financial-year end when libraries

may have uncommitted funds to spend quickly). E-book vendors now commonly offer online (i.e. web-based) platforms for selecting and ordering individual e-books (the 'steady stream' model) and in addition will work with libraries to supply a spreadsheet or database of titles that meet a library's selection criteria for the purchase of a tailored collection of titles, where available.

The NoWAL group was thus relieved to be able to note that, in future, the content-selection problem is more likely to be one restricted to the scope of the individual NoWAL member library. Furthermore, if the 'steady stream' ordering of e-books is adopted, the problem will be little different to that of printed-book selection, except that in respect of e-books the library may have to make choices about whether to purchase or to lease, or how many simultaneous users to licence.

NoWAL E-BOOK SURVEY

A survey on the use of e-books within the consortium was undertaken by the group as part of the report to the NoWAL board. The survey was completed by all libraries included in the original NoWAL/NetLibrary contract.⁷

The number of e-books services offered by individual libraries varied from 1 to 29. All libraries offering e-books continue to offer NetLibrary, and 7 respondents had bought extra NetLibrary titles above and beyond the content negotiated by NoWAL.

Relevant subject coverage was the single most influential factor in choice of e-book supplier among respondents (10 strongly agree, 4 agree). Next most influential was pricing model (6 strongly agree, 7 agree) followed by ease of use (4 strongly agree, 9 agree) and access model (4 strongly agree, 5 agree). Technical considerations (3 strongly agree, 8 agree) and number of titles available (6 strongly agree, 3 agree) were least influential.

When asked to list other factors that had influenced choice of supplier, 3 respondents cited the NoWAL/NetLibrary deal and 3 cited currency of content; 2 respondents cited the permissible number of concurrent users and 2 cited ease of the selection and ordering processes.

Most respondents reported that e-books have been successful, and that usage is increasing. It was reported by 2 that e-books are a firmly established service ('an unqualified success'). Many

respondents highlighted the importance of publicising the availability of e-books plus the integration of online public access catalogue (OPAC) records in increasing uptake. Some respondents link high usage to off-campus students, and one explicitly cited connectivity difficulties at off-campus sites as one reason for comparatively low use.

Almost all respondents saw a role for NoWAL in negotiating consortial deals for e-books in order to maximise value for money. Respondents clearly saw enhanced value in terms of both supplier discount and the saving in staff time in the negotiation process. There was a division among respondents as to what form a future deal might take. The majority of those who expressed a preference clearly restated the need for much more discriminating selection methods, so emphatically voiced during the life of the NetLibrary contract.

OTHER CONSORTIAL DEALS AND RELEVANT STUDIES

In the course of its work the NoWAL E-books Monitoring Group investigated other consortial deals for e-books that have been implemented or were under discussion. The main findings were as follows:

- The NoWAL/NetLibrary deal was and remains unique of its type. NetLibrary personnel reported that publishers are still wary of allowing content to be made available under consortial agreements. This was demonstrated by the increasingly severe restrictions placed on NoWAL's selections in the iterative content-refreshment exercises undertaken during the NetLibrary contract.
- The Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium concluded an agreement for certain ebrary services, and ebrary subsequently extended the same terms across the higher education sector.
- Several JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) agreements are in place for a range of e-book products and collections, although Academic Library's JISC deal had lapsed by the time of the group's study. Other suppliers sometimes use JISC-banded pricing even if the offer is not formally endorsed by JISC Collections. The group concluded that it is highly unlikely that better terms can be obtained by NoWAL than those already offered to the UK higher education market in this way.

- The e-Books (sic) Corporation reported that it has 30 to 35 UK academic libraries using Ebook Library (EBL), but had agreed no deals through consortia thus far.
- NetLibrary was in the process of negotiating a new consortial deal, of a very different character to NoWAL's, with the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF).⁸ This service will be launched on 6 December and it is likely that its main features will be reported on the WHELF website.⁹

The principle relevant research projects or studies identified by the group were:

- The SuperBook Project,¹⁰ which aims to create a live research laboratory at University College London by offering the UCL community access to more than 3,000 e-books (from a variety of suppliers), and then to observe and measure how the collection is used. The project is of particular interest as its focus is on usage by staff and taught and research students, and it will consider topics such as the impact of marketing, links to reading-list databases, involvement by academics and information literacy.
- The JISC E-books Observatory Project¹¹ will license a collection of online core reading materials that are relevant to UK higher education taught-course students in four discipline areas. The project aims to evaluate the use of the e-books through deep log analysis and to assess the impact of the 'free at the point of use' e-books upon publishers, aggregators and libraries. As the project will run from January 2008 to April 2009, it was deemed too long-term to have a bearing on the NoWAL group's remit.
- The Southern Universities Purchasing Consortium¹² has, as part of the deal with ebrary mentioned above, been working with the aggregator on a bespoke collection of nursing-related content. If this proves successful other bespoke subject collections may be possible.

E-BOOKS LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted by the group in an attempt to inform the higher education community (and particularly NoWAL members) of the situation with regard to e-book use. Initially

searches concentrated on information about consortial deals, but very little was found.

The review, therefore, contains articles about choosing, managing, using and promoting e-book collections in higher education institutions both in the UK and elsewhere. Although the articles do not necessarily refer to collections purchased by consortia they may be useful for further understanding and to confirm observations already made.¹³

IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR CONTENT PROVIDERS

In addition to the literature review, the group undertook an exercise to identify the major e-book content providers in order to provide a broad overview of the options available within the current market. This took as its starting point the 2006 CHEMS Consulting report for prepared for JISC.¹⁴ Although it was not possible within the group's timescale to compare and contrast existing service models, an indication of the subject coverage, the number of titles within each collection and a URL to access more information about each service were included.¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The NoWAL E-books Monitoring Group's report to the board concluded with a number of recommendations which were accepted by the NoWAL board at the meeting held on 3 October 2007.

Some of these conclusions related to matters such as the necessity to prepare for the decision as to whether or not to renew access to the NetLibrary legacy collection in summer 2008, and the advantage to the consortium of holding a NoWAL event to enable practitioners with experience of a range of e-book platforms to pool their knowledge. Other conclusions were more substantive, being principally focused on how NoWAL should approach any future consortial e-book procurement exercise, and took into account how the market had changed since the NetLibrary contract was signed.

In response to the widely held concerns in respect of content selection during the NetLibrary agreement, the group recommended that NoWAL does not try to achieve another consortial agreement which purchases or leases a shared collection of e-books. However, given the restriction that publishers have gradually imposed on access to content under multi-library contracts, another

agreement like the original may not be possible in any event.

Despite not being able to undertake a critical evaluation of the NetLibrary service, the group observed from the evidence of participating libraries that most had achieved a critical mass of content, either through NetLibrary or separately through another aggregator or both. This had proved popular with users and had led to further demand. The group therefore recommended that NoWAL negotiates agreements with a number of vendors and seeks a discount on access and platform fees rather than a consortial collection. Libraries would thus be able to select individual titles as and when required, and that discount would be based on the total volume of business placed by NoWAL libraries.

In considering possible vendors that could be approached, the group noted that JISC's increasing engagement with e-books had led to the emergence of measures such as the JISC Collections initiative, and also that some platforms offer JISC-banded pricing even if services are not formally endorsed by JISC. The group consequently took the view that NoWAL is now unlikely to be able to secure better terms for these services by consortial negotiation than those already offered to UK higher education.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 <http://www.nowal.ac.uk> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 2 (electronic resources manager, University of Liverpool Library), Annette Coates (library services manager, electronic services development team, Manchester Metropolitan University Library), Joanna Shepherd (electronic resources and distance learning librarian, University of Chester Library), Shirley Ward (liaison and development team Leader, University of Bolton Library) and Peter Wynne (NoWAL executive secretary).
- 3 See P. M. Wynne, 'The NoWAL NetLibrary e-book collection: a case-study of a consortial agreement', *New review of academic librarianship*, 11 (1), April 2005 pp 81-94.
- 4 http://www.nowal.ac.uk/about_nowal.php?page_id=20 [cited 19 November 2007]

- 5 Annual usage totals for the service were 2004 (Sep to Dec only): 96,246; 2005: 297,014; 2006: 38,1737.
- 6 http://www.nowal.ac.uk/resources_for_nowal_members.php?page_id=21 [cited 19 November 2007]. This shows statistics from September 2004 onwards, updated monthly.
- 7 For more information on the NoWAL survey, please contact the NoWAL office.
- 8 http://www.online-information.co.uk/online07/press_show_item.shtml?press_id=52099 [cited 19 November 2007]
- 9 <http://whelf.ac.uk/background.shtml> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 10 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/superbook/> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 11 <http://www.publishing.ucl.ac.uk/observatory.html> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 12 <http://supc.procureweb.ac.uk/home.jsp> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 13 For further information on the literature review, please contact the NoWAL office.
- 14 CHEMS Consulting, 'A feasibility study on the acquisition of e-books by HE libraries and the role of the JISC' [online], October 2006 [cited 19 November 2007]. Available from: <http://www.jiscebooksproject.org/faq-links/useful-links-further-information/> [cited 19 November 2007]
- 15 For further information on the list of content providers, please contact the NoWAL office.